

National Public Radio Broadcast

Aug. 1 Greetings from Portland
Jeff Brady in Portland's Pioneer Courthouse Square.

Pioneer Courthouse Square has come a long way since shoemaker Elijah Hill bought it in 1849 for \$24 and a pair of boots. Before the redbrick amphitheater-style square became Portland's "Living Room," it was a school, then a hotel and then a parking lot.

The city acquired the block from local department store chain Meier and Frank (now a child of parent May Department Stores) in 1979. Pioneer Courthouse Square was dedicated in 1984 and named for the historic federal courthouse across the street.

Today, it's a great place for a reporter to go if he wants to find out what people in Portland are talking about. Around 21,000 people pass through the square each day, so you're bound to find some pretty interesting opinions. I stopped by after a workday to ask folks about their relationship with their government.

In just a few minutes, I met several locals, ran across someone I used to interview regularly when I was a reporter for Oregon Public Broadcasting, talked with a woman from Massachusetts, watched a blues band conduct a pre-performance warm-up and chatted with a nice couple from Windsor, Ontario. Colleen McDonald reminded me (out of habit from having to tell every American, it seemed) that Windsor is located right across the border from Detroit, Mich.

Whenever I come across Canadians, I always want to chat with them. I don't remember learning anything about Canada in school, and we certainly don't hear much about our northern neighbor in the news.

So, I posed the question to McDonald that I've been asking all the Americans I run across on this trip through the Western U.S. What's your relationship with the U.S. government?

"Well, I think this government is very aggressive," McDonald said. "And it's been difficult to have a good relationship with them. Canada is like the little sister, I think. They want that protection only when they want that protection. And it's hard to live in the shadow of the United States. But, you know, we're good neighbors. But sometimes we have family squabbles. And I think we're in that period right now."

There was a blues concert going on at the time. There are seven free blues concerts scheduled in the square over the summer. There's also free music during the lunch hour some days.

Pioneer Courthouse Square is just a great place to hang out. In today's real estate market, the block is probably worth a lot of money. But it's nice to know that, as a community, we can still set aside public spaces like this -- a living room -- where we can go and meet a few people with whom we might never connect otherwise.

-- Jeff Brady